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SUBJECT: BENIN: LOCAL ELECTIONS PREPARATIONS AMIDST POLITICAL TENSION AND ALLEGATIONS OF FRAUD

REF: (A) COTONOU 104 (B) COTONOU 43 (C) 07 COTONOU 817

¶11. (U) SUMMARY: Preparations for local elections, now scheduled for April 20, continue apace in Benin against a backdrop of logistical problems, alleged fraud, and mounting political tension. The National Independent Electoral Commission (CENA) completed voter registration. Tension between President Yayi's political coalition, Force Cowrie for an Emerging Benin (FCBE), and his former allies in the other political parties reached a climax in a public meeting of party leaders, during which they denounced his Presidency. The police arrested and released eleven CENA officials allegedly involved in an illegal withdrawal of voter identification cards from the CENA. END SUMMARY.

President Yayi versus G13 and G4

¶12. (SBU) Relations between President Yayi and his political opponents have grown tenser over the last month. President Yayi faces two different groups of loosely allied political leaders. The first is known as the G13, a group of 13 National Assembly deputies from minor political parties. These deputies originally supported the FCBE in the National Assembly but split away from the President in February over his decision to run a single list of FCBE candidates in the municipal elections instead of allowing coalition member parties to field their own candidates. The second group is the G4, a loose grouping of Benin's four main political parties, outside of the FCBE, which include the Renaissance of Benin (RB - Nicéphore Soglo) party, the Party of Democratic Renewal (PRD - Adrien Houngbedji), the Social Democrat Party (PSD - Bruno Amoussou) and the African Movement for Development and Progress Party (MADEP - Sefou Fagbohoun). Their leaders made a very public joint declaration harshly criticizing President Yayi's government and policies on March 12. The G4 feels it has been shut out of President Yayi's government, and takes issue with his frequent "campaign" style trips and his almost daily appearances on local television stations.

3.(SBU) In an attempt to defuse tensions President Yayi turned to the government mediator, Albert Teveoedjre, one of his political mentors, to establish dialogue with the G13 and G4. Teveoedjre's efforts have been mostly for naught. According to an embassy source close to PRD's president Adrien Houngbedji, Teveoedjre is seen as a tool of President Yayi, and PRD sees little reason to cooperate with him. While some sources are willing to speak freely about the upcoming elections, the embassy has noticed a reticence on the part of many to speak about the elections, much of which can be attributed to this week's accusations against RB members of stealing election materials.

Disappearance of 50,000 Voter Cards

14. (U) On April 2, the police arrested 11 members of the CENA, including the CENA's Budget Coordinator and other members from the CENA's local body in the Littoral District, which includes Cotonou, on allegations of theft of voter materials. According to press reports, those arrested are accused misappropriating 50,000 blank voter identification cards from the CENA headquarters under the pretext of supplying local registration agents. The current location and exact numbers of the cards are unknown. The accused include several active RB members which casts a pall of suspicion on the RB party. Note: The race for control of Cotonou's city hall is expected to be fierce with President Yayi's FCBE fielding Jerome Dandjinou, the current Port Director, in opposition to the RB's current Mayor and former Beninese President Nicephore Soglo (RB). In 2002 Mr. Dandjinou also served as head of the Cotonou District, equivalent to the mayor position today; his social and economic achievements were much appreciated while holding this position. End Note. On April 1, Rosine Soglo, member of the National Assembly, party leader of RB, fraction chief of ADD, a parliamentarian grouping, and wife of the Mayor, went to the CENA to express regret for the alleged theft of the 50,000 voter's cards. End Note. On April 3, Cotonou's public prosecutor arraigned the 11 accused persons and the court placed them in pre-trial detention. On April 8 the Cotonou Court released them after a trial.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: The tensions characterizing the current political climate are typical during the preparation of elections in Benin. This time the tensions are higher than usual, however, because President Yayi's FCBE seeks to challenge the G13 and G4 for control of municipalities in their strongholds of Cotonou and Parakou in advance of the 2011 presidential elections. The accusations of voter identification card theft are problematic, because they could be an indicator of more wide-spread fraud and serve losing parties

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ammunition to contest the election results. While many observers think President Yayi should try to bring the political parties together in the interests of social peace, this will prove increasingly difficult after these hotly contested municipal elections and the likelihood of the G4 and the G13 jockeying for position as they look ahead to the 2011 presidential election. END COMMENT

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